

Oral Examinations

Preparing for the Structured Oral Examination

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Welcome

The following information is designed to help you understand and prepare for the structured oral examination portion of the selection process. Specifically, this guide will help you:

- Understand the function of the structured oral examination.
- Assist you with identifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for a position.
- Formulate effective responses to interview questions.
- Practice and prepare for your oral examination.
- Learn about the oral examination process.

Purpose of the Structured Oral Examination

An oral examination, sometimes referred to as a Qualifications Appraisal Panel or QAP is not a hiring interview, even though it is conducted in an interview format. The structured oral examination is a selection tool that is used to measure job characteristics that are difficult to measure via a written test, such as oral communication skills and interpersonal skills. The examination is also used to evaluate an applicant's ability to perform a job. During the examination, candidates are asked a series of objective job-related questions and the responses are rated by a panel, using pre-established answer guidelines. All candidate are asked the exact same job related questions in the same order by the same panel members and are provided the same total amount of time to respond.

It is important to note that the panelists are not given a copy of your application or resume; therefore it is important that your responses to the questions be detailed and provide sufficient information about your qualifications.

Preparing for the Structured Oral Examination

In order to fully demonstrate your qualifications for the position, candidates should adequately prepare in advance of the oral examination. Below are some recommendation to assist you with preparing for the examination:

1. **Learn** about the specific County and department where the position is located.
2. **Review** the position requirements and duties that are listed on the announcement.

The job announcement typically provides the following information:

- Position description.
- Minimum requirements and desirable qualifications, if applicable (e.g. education, experience, knowledge, skills and abilities)
- Examination components (i.e., tentative examination dates)

Note that the job announcement will only be available to view online during the application acceptance period.

3. **Review the class specification** document for the necessary duties, knowledge, skills, abilities, and minimum qualifications (education and/or experience) needed for the position.

A listing of the class specifications which outline knowledge, skills, and abilities can be found in the [Classification Specifications](#)

4. **Think of examples** from your current or past employment that best demonstrates the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for the position.

A method to help you prepare your responses is the [STAR method](#).

5. **Develop mock questions** and practice answering them verbally in front of others. Candidates will often find it helpful to simulate the environment that they will face at the oral examination.

6. **Prepare a closing statement** that highlights your knowledge, skills, and abilities as they relate to the position.

What Happens in the Structured Oral Exam

Typically, the oral examination panel will consist of three members. The Chairperson will represent Merit System Services (MSS) and will be responsible for facilitating the exam administration. The second and third panel members are typically county subject matter experts who are familiar with the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the position. In some cases, one of the panel members may be a subject matter expert from another county.

At the time you arrive for your scheduled oral examination, the receptionist will provide you with the names of the panel members and information about the exam for you to read and sign. If you do not feel comfortable that one of the panel members can fairly rate your responses, you may tell the chair that you would like the panel member to be excused; however, please note that you may only excuse one panel member. The chairperson will then introduce you to the panel and give you a chance to get settled. The panel realizes that appearing for a structured oral exam is not an everyday experience and that is natural for you to feel a bit uncomfortable. Be yourself; people make the best impression when they act naturally.

The structured oral examination is competitive and structured. All candidates will be asked the same questions in the same order. The questions asked will be job related and are designed to elicit information indicating how candidates would perform on the job. The ratings you receive

are based upon the overall responses you provide to the oral examination questions. Make sure you include sufficient detail in your responses for the panel to evaluate your experience. If you have passed or failed previous exams, it will have no effect on this exam. Please be advised that you may not bring notes or reference documents into the structured oral examination.

Once the oral examination is completed, the panel will rate your responses based on each question's pre-established criteria. These ratings will then be provided to MSS. The examination will determine your rank on the eligible list. Please keep in mind that passing the oral examination does not guarantee you will be invited to a hiring interview or hired for the position.

Types of Questions Asked at an Oral Examination

Questions asked at the oral examination are designed to assess the knowledge, skills and abilities required to perform the job. These questions may fall under one of the following categories:

Knowledge-based oral examination questions specifically address level of familiarity with the program terminology, or practices, concepts and theories related to the career field in question. For example:

- *What accounting practices would you use to ensure that budget reporting obligations are fulfilled?*
- *What are the most important factors for an Eligibility Specialist to consider when attempting to establish a working relationship with a client, and why?*

Experience-based oral examination questions address the scope of your application of job related knowledge, skills and abilities. Examples include:

- *What type of office equipment have you used on the job and what kinds of routine tasks do you perform using this equipment?*
- *Describe your experience classifying, cataloguing, reviewing and evaluating books within a large-sized public library system.*

Behavioral-based oral examination questions require you to apply your knowledge, skills and abilities in a job-related situation. The two types of behavior-based interview questions are **past behavior** and **situational**.

- *Tell me about a time when you provided exemplary customer service. What were the circumstances, what did you do and what were the results? (past behavior)*
- *An important client arrives at the office and demands to see your supervisor without an appointment. How would you handle this? (situational)*

- *Describe a decision you made that was unpopular and how you handled implementing it. (past behavior)*
- *What do you do when your schedule is interrupted? Give an example of how you would handle it. (situational)*

Personal Perspective-based oral examination questions ask you to relate your viewpoint or perspective regarding a job-related variable. For example:

- *Why do you think it would be important for a person to be able to function under minimal supervision?*
- *What do you believe is the most important role for a consumer advocate in today's marketplace and why?*

Open interview questions provide the candidate an opportunity to share general information about their specific qualities. This type of question is only asked:

- *Please tell us about your previous experience?*
- *What are the strengths you bring to this position?*

Competitive Rating Factors

The areas on which you will be assessed will depend on the level of position you are applying for and the specific duties of the position. Questions may focus on job-specific knowledge that would be acquired through job experience or be situational that may be used to determine specific area of knowledge. Some examples of areas on which you may be assessed include:

1. **Presentation:** Communication skills appropriate to the classification – ability to understand implications of questions and respond with clarity and directness; resourcefulness, judgement, and perceptiveness in discussing practical problems of the job; appropriateness of language, terminology, and expressions.
2. **Readiness:** Background and abilities for the classification.
 - A. **Background:** Education and work experience (length, breadth, recency, etc.); work record (progress, changes, etc.); self-improvement efforts, in-service training programs, and job assignments.
 - B. **Ability:** To deal with the practical problems of the job; to accept increased responsibility; to work effectively with people.
3. **Supervision:** Ability to perform in a supervisory or administrative assignment required by the classification; ability to plan and organize; ability to make effective decisions; ability to train, direct and monitor the work of others; understanding and possession of the qualities necessary for effective supervision.

Results

You may expect your results in approximately two weeks following the structured oral exam. The results will also be provided to the county and they will use this information in determining the next steps of the hiring process. Results of some exams may take a longer or shorter period of time, depending on the number of candidates and the length of time it takes to process all candidates.

Additional Tips

Prior to the Oral Examination:

- Practice by conducting a mock interview.
- Identify strengths and weaknesses and prepare for your examination.
- Clarify your thought and prepare your responses
- Plan your travel, get directions at least a day in advance. Map the address of the interview site and choose an alternate route in case of traffic issues. If possible, drive by the location ahead of time and not the parking lot location.

On the Day of the Oral Examination:

- Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes prior to your scheduled oral examination and allow time for traffic, parking and check-in.
- Have proper identification as indicated in your invitation letter.

During the Oral Examination:

- Turn off any electronic device that you have with you.
- Offer a firm handshake and a pleasant smile when introducing yourself to the panel.
- Direct your responses to all the members of the panel, not just the member asking the question.
- The panel members will be taking notes while you respond to a question, do not let this distract you.
- Do not be afraid to allow a moment of silence during the examination while you take time to formulate your thoughts.
- Avoid speaking too quickly. Make sure your responses are clear, concise and complete.
- Avoid using slang and phrases such as “um” and “ah.”

After the Oral Examination:

- At the conclusion of the oral examination, thank the panel members for their time and offer each a firm handshake.

- The oral examination process is competitive. All exam content must remain confidential. Under Government code, Section 19680, the structured oral process is confidential and it is unlawful for a candidate to discuss the exam process with any other candidate. Failure to observe these regulations can result in disqualification from the exam and possible punitive action.

Disclaimer

This guide presents useful information on the subject area, there is no guarantee that someone who reads this guide will be able to perform better on the structured oral examination. By using this guide, you consent to understanding and agreeing with this disclaimer.